Music is only universal language... is it?

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Abstract
The article shows the relationship between music and language through different periods of History. The established link between these two fields justifies the teaching of musical concepts in the English lessons. These teachings are intended to fulfill a more complete and global formation of our students which can open some doors in a possible musical profession or hobby to be developed in the future. It is also exposed the Music subject situation in Spanish nowadays laws.

Keywords: Foreign Language, Music, History, Didactic of English

Título: La musica es el lenguaje universal..., seguro?

Resumen
El artículo muestra la relación establecida entre la música y el lenguaje a lo largo de los diferentes periodos históricos. El vínculo establecido entre estos dos campos justifica la enseñanza de términos musicales en la asignatura de Inglés. Mediante estas enseñanzas se pretende obtener una formación más completa y global de nuestros alumnos que pueda abrirles las puertas de una posible profesión o afición musical a desarrollar en el futuro. Se ofrece también una breve exposición de la situación de la Educación Musical en la legislación española.

Palabras clave: Lengua extranjera, Musica, Historia, Didactica del Ingles.

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How many times have you heard the affirmation that music is the only universal language? Thousands of times we have been told that a Japanese violinist can sit next to a Mexican pianist and play something together, but, is it completely true?

Music is recognised as language and as a language is learnt in almost all the music schools around the planet. In fact music has had a close relationship with languages through his history. Some authors like Charles Darwin\(^1\) or Stokowski\(^2\) consider that the beginning of the music was the imitation of the bird’s sing, what has been proved as the way these animals have to communicate.

\(^1\) Charles Darwin (England 1809-1882) Writer of “The Origin of the Species” and revolutionary of the way we understand the human evolution.

Many years after the human started to imitate the birds there were musical traditions in several civilizations (Egypt, Jew, Chinese or Sumerian) but it is very difficult to rebuild music in those times because there are few archaeological rests which can be useful.

First time that music can be traced and analyzed in history is in Greece. Greeks created a whole musical system and they considered the music as an essential pillar for the development of a person. Music in this civilization was closely linked to the theatre and, therefore, to the language.

Contacts between Greek and Roman civilizations made that they share a lot of elements of their culture (for example, mythology is very similar. They had the same Gods with different names). And Rome adopted the musical culture from their Greek neighbours adapting it to their own language, the Latin.

That Latin language would be the conductor language for the music for the next centuries. Religious music drank from Jewish fonts and Roman fonts to give form to what we know as Gregorian chant, a particular music genre without established rhythm in which the music was completely at the service of the language. It was the song prayer what gave sense to these chants. The sounds correspond to different syllables and this circumstance was what gave name to the sounds that we nowadays know as notes. In the X century an Italian monk called Guido d'Arezzo took the sounds of the Hymn to Saint John the Baptist ("Ut queant laxis"), in which each verse starts in a different pitch (first verse in Do, second in Re and successively), so he gave to each sound at the beginning of the verse the name of the syllable pronounced.

As the syllable “Ut” was hard to pronounce it was changed in the XVII for the current “Do”. Notes with different names made easier to teach new monks, but at some point that wasn’t enough and the Gregorian monks were the first in write the music using different lines to represent the different pitches of the notes to make it more visual.

Music sheets for the mentioned Hymn to Saint John the Baptist with its lyrics in Latin.

Translation of the lyrics of the hymn into English.
In the XI century Latin start to lose its pre-eminence in the music. Out of the monasteries and churches there were people who started to sing in their own vernacular language. They were the minstrels and jugglers.

In the XVV and XVI centuries with the Renaissance and the Lutheran reform that great authors like Monteverdi in Italy, Morley in France or Narvaez in Spain, started to include their mother tongue in their compositions and gave space to those languages spoken in the churches. Those were times of changes and Latin was moved by popular languages as the communication tool with God.

In the Baroque music was thought to overpass the words and sing them affectively, not just serve to the language. But the language was still there as a main element in the music. This is the movement which gave birth to the Opera. First opera was premiered on 1600 and it was "Euridice" by Jacobo de Peri, although the most important opera of these times is "Orpheo" by Monteverdi. The most important language in that time was the Italian, all the operas dialogues are written in Italian, and most of the musical terms we used nowadays (piano, forte, allegro, andantino…) come from these years.

Opera become the most important genre in music. Artists like Gluck, Haydn or the well-known Mozart wrote Operas. None of them was Italian, but Italian was the language to be used in music. In Spain there was a local kind of genre similar to Opera in some aspects, the “Zarzuela”, but in these Italian fashion times even the Spanish genre goes Italian.

Romanticism is the cultural movement which took part during the XIX and part of the XX centuries. In this movement the authors claim for their languages importance and start to produce works on their local languages. It is known as the Nationalism and has its biggest impact on the East of Europe. We can find authors like Borodin or Rimsky-Korsakoff from Russia, or Dvorak from Czech Republic composing on their language and inspiring on their countries, their landscapes and their musical tradition. Music starts to use many different languages. And as a consequence of this weakness of the Italian, and thanks to Wagner and some of his works like “Lohengrin”, “Tannhäuser” or specially “The Ring of The Nibelung” the German gets a special place on the music scene.

In Spain this Italian decadency facilitates the rise of the “Zarzuela” with authors like Chapi or Breton. They are times in which all the languages tried to hold the main position on its own frontiers.

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5 Original front cover from the Music sheets for the opera “Orphee” by Monteverdi in 1609
During the XX century there are a lot of changes in the society, there are two world wars and the communications starts to be more and more efficient making the world smaller. We can see the born of new genres like blues, rock, folk or pop which in most of the cases have the English as the conductor language. These genres are developed in many of the cases by musicians who learnt to play an instrument by ear in their family and can’t read or write music like it was traditionally made. This is the case of some musicians as important as BB King, Pete Townsend (The Who), Paul McCartney or John Lennon (The Beatles).

This new generation of musicians who couldn’t read or write music develop their own system to leave their work in a paper and be able to play the same again. Or to be more precise they use an old way of writing music. Back in 1300 there was a system in which the jugglers draw on a paper the cords of the instrument and the position of the fingers during the song, it was called Tablature. These young musicians found much easier represent the position of their fingers than learn to write in the classical way. This new system to write the songs played with guitars spread fast and became very popular because it was very easy to use.

This kind of pop music is the best-seller nowadays and all the youngsters want to play the guitar to imitate their idols and write their own compositions to become famous some day and sell as much copies as Bruce Springsteen or The Rolling Stones.

When you want to learn to play a musical instrument, let it be a guitar or a French horn, you need to learn the musical language. Some of you may think it is not hard when our children are receiving one hour of musical education in the school from 1st year in Primary Education. In first place I would like to start by mentioning the situation in which the musical education is in our Educatив System nowadays. Music is part of the Arts subject, which is not compulsory according to the Lomce⁶ (valid national law).

It falls below the Catholic Religion subject. According to the law, students will course five compulsory subjects (Natural Science, Social Science, Mathematics, Spanish Language and English Language) plus two specifics (Physical Education and one to choose between Catholic Religion or Social and Civic Values) and depending on the offer of the autonomic communities and the schools one to choose amongst Arts, Second foreign language, or Religion or Values, the one not chosen in the previous section. So, it can happen, that a student finish his/her educational life without having studied never music, which is, in my opinion, a complete disgrace.

Thanks to the autonomic government and the commitment of the educative centres which know the importance of the music in the development of a completely competent individual⁷ our children still receive two weekly hours of musical education on most of the schools.

But apart from being in danger of disappearance in the educative system, going back to the music contents taught in our schools, our children learn to play the recorder, which is a wind instrument not very hard to play. It is supposed that our children learn the basics of the musical language and the technique necessary to play that easy instrument what will help them to

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⁶ Article 18 of the Lomce about the organization of Primary Education

⁷ Let’s remember there is a specific competence about arts, the seventh one, Cultural Awareness and Expression
express their feelings through the music and to understand others’ feelings as well as to understand the complexity of any musical composition.

Therefore it is completely normal we think our children can learn to play the guitar without much effort given the situation that they know the basic of the musical language. The teaching of the guitar is through the previously mentioned tablature. The tablature is a form of musical notation indicating instrument fingering rather than musical pitches. That means that instead of having 5 lines with the notes on them, we have six lines (or four depending on the instrument) in which the position of the fingers is representing. So, our children will have to learn a new system, which, a priori is easier. But the next surprise is that these “old” modern composers also changed the name of the notes.

They start naming the notes with letters, capital letters starting on the reference note “La”. All the instruments in a Symphonic Orchestra tuned the first to the “La” sound, and the rest of the notes come later. The sound “La” is considered the reference note, and in fact if you listen to it more often than what you think. The tones that a phone makes when you are calling someone are tuned to the note “La”. Given that importance to the note “La” they decided to call that sound with the capital letter A, and so on, the sound Si with the capital letter B... Until we have the following equivalence chart.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional name</th>
<th>Tablature name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DO</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RE</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MI</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FA</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOL</td>
<td>G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SI</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But these are not the only English words we can find in nowadays musical language. There are translations of many different terms in what structure of the tunes refers. We can then agree that musical education is not on its best moment in our educative system and even if it were in a great moment, it wouldn’t be enough for our youngsters learning to play a “serious” instrument or moving around the world playing.

On the Order ECD 65/2015 about the relationship between competences, contents and assessment criteria in Primary, Secondary Education and Bachelor, on its article it is established that “All the areas or subjects in the curriculum ought to participate, from their own scope, in the development of the different competences in the students”. So, we must agree that this order enables if not makes us to contribute to the development of all the competences, including the Cultural Awareness and Expression.

Having in mind the importance of the English in any field, and overall in music and cinema, it would be a good idea to include some bits of musical vocabulary in English language in every lesson plan of English as a Second Language subject in the schools. In the beginning it could be simple things like “lyrics” or “chorus” to slowly go deeper until they can understand what is a “time signature” or “pitch of a note”.

By these means we would be working with the English language in a decontextualized environment and immersed in a topic which can be highly motivator for our students. There are many activities and projects to be developed around the music in English language.

We can encourage our students to form groups and try to communicate with some music students abroad to get help on their group, or to exchange experiences. They will be speaking about a topic of their interest, because they will choose the members of their group and the kind of music they want to make, and they will be doing it in English. So we could say they are practicing and learning without noticing it, which could be the final aim.

If our students are older enough and they can play some instruments we can encourage them to form a band and try to compose, record and promote their own songs. They will be able to know the way that musical industry works and the hardest moments that all the young rock bands have to go through. We will be working in the Cultural and Awareness Expression, the Linguistic Competence, Sense of Initiative and Entrepreneurship, Digital Competence and Socio Civic Competence. With only one activity we can work on the development of many different competences.
We can encourage them to work on other countries’ music. And they will need to get in touch with other countries to find information about their music and some specific characteristics of their popular music. For example if they get in touch with Czech Republic, the modes and the traditional rhythms will not be the same as if they get in touch with Italy. They will be working on the respect to other cultures (Social and Civic Competence), the Cultural Awareness and Expression, the Linguistic Competence and the Digital Competence, because obviously the communications would be carried out through the internet.

Music is always an appealing topic for the children, and there are many different activities that can be proposed around it to be used in the English class. We can even ask our students for their own ideas of projects to be developed and we may discover new great ideas to be added to our repertoire of activities.

As Plato said “Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flights to the imagination and life to everything”. Music was one of the most important subjects in the classic cultures (Greece and Rome) and they thought it was one of the main tools to form complete individuals. I have received so much from the music and the English that I truly think it will be a great benefit to our future citizens.

Our governors and our laws tell us about the development of fully competent students and want us the teachers to produce generations of successfully entrepreneurs. But as a general rule we can only cram the contents into our students’ heads most of the time without having for sure if they are going to be able to use that knowledge in their life. It is high time we teach our students something they can use for their sake. I am sure that study Music in English, not as an obligation, but as something funny which give them some freedom to use it and see the benefits can motivate and help our students to improve their English level and their humanistic formation.

“Life is one grand, sweet song, so start the music”

Ronald Reagan